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ABSTRACT

This report presents the results of a questionnaire sent to the daily and weekly newspaper editors in Washington to evaluate their sources of agricultural news. Responses were obtained from 16 of 21 daily newspaper editors queried and 63 of 140 weekly editors. The questionnaire was designed to check the accuracy of newspapers' mailing addresses, how and why editors use agricultural news and photographs, what sources of agricultural news editors rely on and why, and how editors evaluate the agricultural news they receive from all Extension sources. From the results it is concluded that (1) there will be continued reliance on county agents to get news to the state's newspapers; (2) agents need to develop more personal contacts with more weekly editors; and (3) news and photograph quality need to be upgraded and news needs to be more readily adaptable to local situations. The data from this survey will be used in training new and current Extension agents to better meet the needs of Washington's newspapers. (JS)

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HOW DO WASHINGTON'S NEWSPAPER EDITORS EVALUATE THEIR SOURCES OF AGRICULTURAL NEWS?---A SURVEY

BY

M. W. SAMPSON

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE INFORMATION SPECIALIST

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

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GENERAL DISCUSSION

Survey Background: A questionnaire asking Washington State's daily and weekly newspaper editors to evaluate their sources of agricultural news was mailed Dec. 2, 1971, to 21 daily newspaper editors and to 140 weekly editors. The questionnaire was designed to answer three main questions of concern to Extension information specialists, to check the accuracy of newspapers' mailing addresses and to give editors a chance to comment on the news materials and service they had been receiving from the WSU Cooperative Extension Service.

By Feb. 11, 1972, a total of 16 daily editors and 63 weekly editors had sent the questionnaire back to Pullman.

The Three Main Questions: All but four of the survey's 21 questions are summarized briefly in the following pages and figured in percentages in the weekly-daily breakdown following the general discussion. The four questions asked about each newspaper's mailing lists, asked the title of the person completing the questionnaire and asked for comments.

The other 17 questions in the survey fall into the three main areas of 1) How and why do Washington's newspaper editors use agricultural news and photos? 2) What sources of agricultural news do newspaper editors rely on and why? 3) How do newspaper editors evaluate the agricultural news they receive from all Extension sources?

The one question that does not fit into a particular group, but was included to guarantee the accuracy of the editors' responses, asked whether the person completing the questionnaire was the one who normally handled agricultural news for the newspaper. Since 13 of the 16 daily editors and 55 of the 63 weekly editors who replied said they were the ones responsible, the survey's information is reasonably accurate.

The first main question, covered on the first and second pages of the returns, asked, "How and why do Washington newspaper editors use agricultural news and photos?" About two-thirds of the daily newspaper editors said they publish agricultural news each day, but not within a specific section of the paper. Slightly more than half of the weekly newspapers use agricultural news each week, but within no specific section of the paper. This information gives the Extension Service a better idea of the market for agricultural news in Washington's papers.

The state's editors lived up to the newsman's ideal of tailoring news for readers on a basis of reader interest, adaptability to a local situation and timeliness when it comes to chosing agricultural news. Unfortunately, Extension news releases from Pullman and Puyallup which deal with agriculture all too often miss the mark in the area of adaptability to a local situation. This, however, should not be the case with news releases sent to editors from county Extension agents.

About three-fourths of the daily and weekly editors who replied to the survey said they plan to use the same amount of agricultural news in the coming year, and about one-fourth plan to use more. Although no major change in the output of news materials from Extension was planned, editors confirmed the fact they are reasonably happy with the amount of news they are receiving from all agricultural sources, although there may be a market among some newspapers for more news. This answer closely paralleled the answer editors gave in response to a specific question about wanting more news from Extension sources, although the percentage figure of all editors wanting the same amount of news was less.

In the area of photos, on the other hand, about four-fifths of both daily and weekly editors said they would like to receive more agricultural photos. The survey's returns indicated that a much greater percentage of daily newspapers receive photos from agricultural sources than do the weeklies.

The two primary reasons for the use of agricultural news is general reader interest, and the increased realization of agriculture's relationship with the environment. Without the current emphasis on the environment, the latter reason perhaps would not have applied, in spite of the fact agriculture has been associated with environmental quality in one way or another since man first began to grow his own food.

Daily and weekly editors agreed to the percentage point on the fact their nonfarm readers are mildly interested in agricultural news, and weeklies and dailies also agreed that their nonfarm readers are not changing their interest in agricultural news. This in part explains why newspaper editors said they planned to use about the same amount of agricultural news in the upcoming year.

In the second main question asked by the survey, "What sources of agricultural news do newspaper editors rely on and why?", the Extension Service received a gratifying response. The second page of the actual survey returns shows that the county Extension agent was the first and second choice of agricultural news sources. The returns are arranged to show editors' first, second and third choices in the order in which they were chosen. In other words, in the returns from weekly editors, 60 per cent chose the county agent as their first choice, while the 28 per cent who chose the county agent as their second choice had some other first choice.

In chosing their most important source of agricultural news, Washington editors felt the main factors in their choice were subject matter, timeliness and the dependability of the source. Daily editors felt, on the average, that timeliness was the most important element, while weekly editors felt that subject matter was the most important factor.

Daily and weekly editors alike chose the Farm Bureau as the least important source of agricultural news, followed by the Washington Grange for daily editors and the U.S. Department of Agriculture for the weekly editors.

In regard to the third main question, "How do newspaper editors evaluate the agricultural news they receive from all Extension sources?", which is on the third and fourth pages of the survey results, editors rated the areas of subject matter, timeliness, story length and style of agricultural news from the WSU Cooperative Extension Service as "good" for the most part. Extension information specialists and county agents have been trying to put stories in a general form that is acceptable to most newspapers, or "shooting for an average." But pleasing each daily and weekly editor in the state most likely would be a virtual impossibility.

As would be expected, daily editors said they would like to receive stories from Extension sources as soon as possible from the time the stories are written. Weekly editors were split almost half and half regarding their preference of receiving stories once a week in a packet vs. receiving a story as soon as possible from the time it is written. Since the weeklies are pretty close in splitting the issue down the middle, this leads to a difficult decision on the part of Extension in regard to providing the service the weeklies say they want.

All the editors replying almost unanimously agreed though that they had been receiving Extension news materials promptly. This item was included to check on the effectiveness of WSU's mailing services in getting releases promptly to the state's editors.

One strange item did come out of this particular survey area though. A greater percentage of daily editors knew the county Extension agent(s) for agriculture in their counties than did weekly editors. This indicates a gap that Extension needs to fill, since the weeklies, as well as the dailies, play a vital part in Extension's overall educational program in Washington. Most editors did indicate that they received news materials from a county Extension agent on the average of once a week.

Conclusions: The good response to the survey from daily editors lends weight to the accuracy of the information obtained. Unfortunately, not even half of the weekly editors in the state responded to the questionnaire. This lessens the accuracy of conclusions that could be drawn from weekly editors' use and evaluation of agricultural news.

Since editors said they depended primarily on the county Extension agent as their first choice of agricultural news, the WSU Cooperative Extension Service will continue to rely heavily on the county agents for getting news to the state's newspapers. Increased emphasis does need to be placed though on the need for agents to develop personal contacts with more weekly editors.

Efforts are being made in Pullman and Puyallup to upgrade the quality of news and photos editors receive from these Extension sources. Editors' responses to the survey do point out the need to work for more adaptability to local situations in news releases. Perhaps the only way to do this is to devise some kind of mailing list which will supply editors with only those stories which would apply to specific areas of the state. Breaking Washington into commodity regions would be one way to handle this.

Information provided by editors also will be used in training new and current Extension agents to better meet the needs of Washington's newspapers.

Although this particular survey dealt with agricultural news, the WSU Cooperative Extension Service does much of its information work in the areas of home economics and 4-H, especially in urban areas of the state. Perhaps at a later date, home economics and 4-H news will be presented to the state's editors for their evaluations and comments.

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SURVEY RETURNS FROM 16 WASHINGTON DAILY NEWSPAPERS

1) How and why do Washington's newspaper editors use agricultural news and photos?

1. How often does your newspaper publish agricultural news aimed toward farmers, businessmen and other interested readers?

62%---every day, but within no specific section of the paper
31%---every week, and within a specific section of the paper
19%---other
6%---every day, and within a specific section of the paper
6%---every week, but within no specific section of the paper
6%---every two weeks
6%---once a month

2. How do you decide whether or not to use a particular agricultural story?

100%---reader interest
87.5%-adaptability to local situation
87.5%-timeliness
6%---your background

3. Considering agricultural news from all sources, next year do you expect to use more, the same amount or less?

75%---same amount
25%---more

4. Why do you expect to use the volume indicated in the above question?

60%---general reader interest
40%---increased realization of agriculture's relationship with the environment
33%---other
20%---more readers with agricultural orientation in your circulation area
13%---emphasis on the need to supply an increasing population with adequate food
13%---fewer readers with agricultural orientation in your circulation area

5. How interested do you think your nonfarm readers are in agricultural news?

56%---mildly interested
31%---strongly interested
19%---weakly interested
6%---not interested

6. Regarding agricultural news in general, do you think your nonfarm readers are becoming more interested, becoming less interested or not changing their interest?

56%---not changing their interest
25%---becoming more interested
19%---becoming less interested

7. Do you receive photos from your agricultural news sources?

94%---yes
6%---no

8. Concerning photos from your agricultural news sources, would you be interested in receiving more, the same number or less?

80%---more
20%---same number

2) What sources of agricultural news do newspaper editors rely on and why?

1. What do you consider your three most important sources of agricultural news? Editors were asked to rank their choice with Nos. 1, 2 and 3.

No. 1 choice	*No. 2 choice*	*No. 3 choice*
56%---county Extension agent	*31%---county Extension agent*	*19%---Washington Soil Conservation Service*
25%---farmers	*25%---WSU Cooperative Extension Service*	*19%---WSU Cooperative Extension Service*
25%---WSU Cooperative Extension Service	*19%---farmers*	*12.5%-county Extension agent*
6%---USDA	*6%---WSU research stations*	*12.5%-other*
	6%---Washington ASCS	*6%---USDA*
	6%---other	*6%---Washington ASCS*
		6%---Farm Bureau
		6%---Washington Grange
		6%---WSU research stations

2. In the above question, what is your least important source of agricultural news?

40%---Farm Bureau
40%---Washington Grange
13%---USDA
7%---farmers

3. In the question (No. 1) which asked for your No. 1 choice of agricultural news sources, why did you choose the one you did?

81%---timeliness
75%---subject matter
75%---dependability of source
44%---know news source personally
44%---frequency of receiving stories from source
19%---other
12.5%-style

3) How do newspaper editors evaluate the agricultural news they receive from all Extension sources?

1. How would you evaluate the agricultural news you receive from the WSU Cooperative Extension Service?

	excellent	*good*	*average*	*poor*
subject matter	*25%*	*56%*	*19%*	*0*
timeliness	*25%*	*62.5%*	*6%*	*0*
story length	*25%*	*50%*	*25%*	*0*
style	*6%*	*56%*	*37.5%*	*0*

2. Concerning the agricultural news you now receive from the WSU Cooperative Extension Service, would you prefer getting more, the same amount or less?

69%---same amount
25%---more
6%---less

3. How often do you prefer receiving agricultural news from the WSU Cooperative Extension Service?

81%---as soon as possible from the time stories are written
12.5%-once a week in a packet
6%---several times per week
6%---other

4. Have you been receiving WSU Cooperative Extension Service news material promptly, without unusually long delays between release date and the time a story reaches your desk?

94%---yes
6%---no

5. Do you know the county Extension agent(s) for agriculture in your county?

87.5%---yes
12.5%---no

6. On the average, how often does the county Extension agent for agriculture provide you with news material?

87.5%-once a week
19%---daily
6%---every two weeks

Note: On several questions, the percentages will not add up to 100. This is because the question either called for multiple answers, or some editors who answered particular questions marked several choices instead of one.

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SURVEY RETURNS FROM 63 WASHINGTON WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS

1) How and why do Washington's newspaper editors use agricultural news and photos?

1. How often does your newspaper publish agricultural news aimed toward farmers, businessmen and other interested readers?

56%---every week, but within no specific section of the paper
29%---other
11%---every week, and within a specific section of the paper
6.5%-every two weeks
3%---once a month
0----every day, and within a specific section of the paper
0----every day, but within no specific section of the paper

2. How do you decide whether or not to use a particular agricultural story?

88%---reader interest
78%---adaptability to local situation
44%---timeliness
13%---need to fill space on page
9.5%-other reasons
0----your background

3. Considering agricultural news from all sources, next year do you expect to use more, the same amount or less?

68%---same amount
24%---more
8%---less

4. Why do you expect to use the volume indicated in the above question?

74%---general reader interest
26%---increased realization of agriculture's relationship with the environment
22%---more readers with agricultural orientation in your circulation area
16%---fewer readers with agricultural orientation in your circulation area
8%---other
6%---emphasis on the need to supply an increasing population with adequate food

5. How interested do you think your nonfarm readers are in agricultural news?

56%---mildly interested
21%---weakly interested
16%---strongly interested
7%---not interested

WEEKLY RETURNS--ADD ONE

6. Regarding agricultural news in general, do you think your nonfarm readers are becoming more interested, becoming less interested or not changing their interest?

61%---not changing their interest
34%---becoming more interested
5%---becoming less interested

7. Do you receive photos from your agricultural news sources?

48%---yes
44%---no
8%---rarely or seldom

8. Concerning photos from your agricultural news sources, would you be interested in receiving more, the same number or less?

78%---more
11%---same number
11%---less

2) What sources of agricultural news do newspaper editors rely on and why?

1. What do you consider your three most important sources of agricultural news? Editors were asked to rank their choices with Nos. 1, 2 and 3.

No. 1 choice	*No. 2 choice*	*No. 3 choice*
60%---county Extension agent	*28%---county Extension agent*	*26%---WSU Cooperative Extension Service*
17%---farmers	*26%---WSU Cooperative Extension Service*	*17%---Washington ASCS*
9%---WSU Cooperative Extension Service	*11%---Washington ASCS*	*17%---Washington Soil Conservation Service*
2.5%-WSU research stations	*7.5%-farmers*	*11%---other*
2.5%-other	*6%---other*	*9%---Washington Grange*
2%---USDA	*4%---Washington Soil Conservation Service*	*7.5%-farmers*
2%---Washington ASCS	*2.5%-Farm Bureau*	*6%---WSU research stations*
2%---Washington Soil Conservation Service	*2.5%-WSU research stations*	*2%---county Extension agent*
	2%---USDA	

2. In the above question, what is your least important source of agricultural news?

31%---Farm Bureau
31%---USDA
19%---farmers
14%---Washington Grange
5%---Washington ASCS
2%---county Extension agent
2%---WSU research stations

3. In the question (No. 1) which asked for your No. 1 choice of agricultural news sources, why did you choose the one you did?

83%---subject matter
70%---timeliness
41%---dependability of source
31%---frequency of receiving stories from source
31%---know news source personally
15%---other
10%---length of story
5%---style

3) How do newspaper editors evaluate the agricultural news they receive from all Extension sources?

1. How would you evaluate the agricultural news you receive from the WSU Cooperative Extension Service?

	excellent	*good*	*average*	*poor*
subject matter	*25%*	*37%*	*30%*	*7%*
timeliness	*25%*	*49%*	*16%*	*9%*
story length	*9%*	*52%*	*30%*	*5%*
style	*18%*	*51%*	*21%*	*4%*

2. Concerning the agricultural news you now receive from the WSU Cooperative Extension Service, would you prefer getting more, the same amount or less?

60%---same amount
23%---more
17%---less

3. How often do you prefer receiving agricultural news from the WSU Cooperative Extension Service?

46%---once a week in a packet
40%---as soon as possible from the time stories are written
10.5%-other
8%---once every two weeks in a packet

4. Have you been receiving WSU Cooperative Extension Service news material promptly, without unusually long delays between release date and the time a story reaches your desk?

97%---yes
3%---no

5. Do you know the county Extension agent(s) for agriculture in your county?

65%---yes
35%---no

6. On the average, how often does the county Extension agent for agriculture provide you with news material?

54%---once a week
27%---every two weeks
15%---rarely
2%---daily
2%---never

Note: On several questions, the percentages will not add up to 100. This is because the question either called for multiple answers, or some editors who answered particular questions marked several choices instead of one.

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